TRAVELLING NOVEL: POST-ORIENTALISM AND THE POSTMODERN NARRATIVE

A SYNOPSIS OF THE THESIS

I. Introduction

The most significant site of this debate within postcolonial theory – between critiquing the colonialist's discourse as an overarching source of power and upholding the resistant agency of the colonized peoples – has been Edward Said's ground-breaking 1978 book, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*. Said's book radically altered the connotations of the word-idea "Orientalism," defining it as "a style of thought based on an ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the Orient' and (most of the time) 'the Occident'" (2). Writing in the late twentieth-century, Said critiqued American Orientalism as the main neo-colonial discourse that threatens the world from that time to the present. He theorized European Orientalism only to chart out its historical imbrication with the soft and hard colonial power of America in the twentieth century. In the predominant understanding of the term today, European Orientalism is considered to be a thing of the past, since the "corporate institution for dealing with the Orient" (Said, *Orientalism* 3), i.e., Europe's Asian and African colonies, no longer exist. However, in the domain of literature and other arts, Orientalism has not only survived after decolonization, but has also developed newer forms and affiliations.

In his chapter titled "Postmodern-postcolonial Fiction," Brian Nicol observes: "[r]epresentation, whether through the media, art, or other cultural practices, is a crucial and powerful means of maintaining control over a people – but also a way by which the colonized

can resist, subvert, or critique the colonial process" (121). The recycling of Orientalist tropes in postcolonial times has often taken the latter representational trajectory. Nicol writes:

> postmodern theory has supported postcolonialist readings of work produced within England and the United States, where there is a significant number of writers belonging to immigrant communities from previously colonized countries. This focus, after all, is what we might expect from an Anglo-American theoretical phenomenon like postmodernism, especially one which, as Linda Hutcheon has argued, is geared toward developing a critique 'from within' rather than from a detached position outside. (121)

Reading this argument in the context of Orientalist tropes used in postmodern fiction, I shall argue that some postmodern authors recycle and deploy those tropes to carry out an *internal* critique of the Western tradition they write in, unsettling Eurocentric assumptions "from within" European literary forms.

Some literary manifestations of postmodernism and postcolonialism, however, have continued to be implicated in an imaginative reworking of space that can be traced back to Orientalism, impelling a reappraisal of the relationship between this kind of spatial refashioning and the counter-hegemonic imperative of the "post-" movement(s) in literature. Postmodern place-making creates unique *topoi* that can be studied as, indeed, comprising a *topology* – one that is structured by a systematic array of tropes – and, thus, also necessitating a *tropology*, or a systematic study of the recurrent images in a particular tradition. In my thesis, I use the phrase "post-Orientalism" to follow and examine the *t(r)opology* of select postmodern and postcolonial narratives. Post-Orientalism allows one, I argue, to pursue, assemble, and then closely examine the richly cross-connected itineraries of specific tropes such as domes, labyrinths, libraries, and museums, among others – tropes that are deployed

by metafictional authors as culturally-loaded signifiers that make up the defamiliarized settings of their works. Such works portray "Orients as emergent reality" (Weiss 17), which function in tandem with the formal frames of the fragmented internal monologues of postmodern fiction, the social realist novel, the mystery story, and the uncanny narrative in ways that are creatively generative of interpretive possibilities.

In my thesis, I use "post-Orientalist" as a descriptor to understand a particular network of intertexts that appears in several works of fiction, metafiction, as well as nonfiction that reference the Orient to define their setting. For this network, two bodies of writings are key: the first text, the *One Thousand and One Nights*, itself becomes a trope through repeated citation and referentiality, serving as both a narratological model of intertextuality and an inexhaustible reservoir of Oriental imagery. The second component of this network is the corpus of writings of Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1906), whose unique metatextual self-reflexivity has influenced postmodern and metafictional literature throughout the world since the late twentieth century. In general, much criticism has tended to be polarized and has examined the influence of the *Nights* and that of Borges as two separate, discrete literary phenomena. I bring these two vitalizing forces together to indicate that twentieth-century postmodern and postcolonial writings that reference the Orient are ideologically and conceptually shot through with the generative possibilities opened up by the *Nights* and the writings of Borges, and only a combinatorial critical reading can do justice to the ways in which such a thick network highlights the complex and rich history of "the travelling Orient," as it were.

The title of my dissertation refers to Said's essay "Traveling Theory" (1983), and to Timothy Brennan's application of the phrase to Said's *Orientalism* in the essay "The Illusion of a Future: Orientalism as Traveling Theory" (2000). In Said's analysis, Orientalism travels from European colonial to North American neo-imperialist times, becoming further

systematized under “late capitalism” (Jameson xvii). In the literary history that I define, Orientalist tropes travel from European literature to diasporic and third world novels and travel writing, taking up new and subversive meanings in the process. The authors I study in the first three chapters of my thesis are Salman Rushdie, Orhan Pamuk, and Umberto Eco – three major contemporary postmodern novelists who have written novels which deploy and adapt the abovementioned textual nexus between the *One Thousand and One Nights* and Borgesian metafictionality. My fourth chapter is devoted to the occurrence of this intertextual t(r)opology in genres other than postmodern metafiction: travel writing and “travel histories” (Smethurst 156) by William Dalrymple and Amitav Ghosh – two major contemporary writers of historical fiction who recalibrate Orientalist tropes, and the works of two contemporary non-European female authors who occupy a contrapuntal position in the history of Orientalist literature, Hanan al-Shaykh and Elif Shafak. Going from historiographic metafiction (Hutcheon 105) to travel writing by historians, I intend to illustrate the fictive historicity of the Orient which post-Orientalist texts self-reflexively comment upon. Since the transcultural history of the key intertext in my study – the narratives of Shahrazad in the *One Thousand and One Nights* – raises important questions regarding the role of women in Orientalism and its afterlives (Holliday-Karre 157), I end the fourth chapter of my thesis with a discussion of the role of non-Western women authors in the development of literary post-Orientalism. In its scope, my project endeavours to show how the post-Orientalist t(r)opology travels – between continents, cultures, genres, and genders.

II. Orientalism and the Utopian Imagination

While defining Orientalism in modern times as “a field of learned study” (*Orientalism* 49), Said also emphasized the importance of “imagination” as its primary source and structuring variable. As an affective spatial category that has situated the cultural other since the Crusades, the Orient is associated with medieval literature at the very outset of Said’s

treatise: “[t]he Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity *a place of romance*, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences” (*Orientalism* 1, my emphasis). It is described as “one of [Europe’s] deepest and most recurring *images* of the other” (*Orientalism* 1, my emphasis). Here, Said seems to see the Orient as an abstract spatial category as well as an image that structures the West’s fantastical yet ideological perception of its others. In its circulatory energies as both a spatial and a textual *image*, the Orient in Said’s theorization may well be called a *trope*.

Orientalism is clearly the ideological tool which helps Europe define itself in relation to the perceived non-West, hence defining both the collective self and its other as what Benedict Anderson famously termed “imagined communities” (6). The West and the East are imagined communities in an even more substantial sense than in Anderson’s analysis of nationalism, since they are purely ideological categories not definable by any precise geographical or cartographical parameter. However, since the imaginative aspect is less ideologically predictable than other aspects of Orientalist knowledge/power, Said needed to theorize its place in the colonial machinery as a whole: “The interchange between the academic and the more or less imaginative meanings of Orientalism is a constant one, and since the late eighteenth century there has been a considerable, quite disciplined—perhaps even regulated—traffic between the two” (*Orientalism* 3). Owing to the Foucauldian bent of his arguments, Said’s analysis has been criticized as too monological by many later commentators, who have argued that “it duplicates the tactics of Orientalism (the method) by refusing to take on board the numerous ways in which non-Western intellectuals have responded to, resisted, or refuted the dominant representations of the Orient in the West” (Huggan, “(Not) Reading” 131). In other words, Said has been accused of ignoring the agency of the colonized cultures in responding to Orientalist discourse in both European and vernacular languages, as well as in playing an active role in the production and circulation of

Orientalist discourse. Furthermore, in his hard-hitting study *In Theory*, Aijaz Ahmad argues that one of the central dimensions of Orientalism that Said ignores is that for a long period of time, "even though it may occasionally use religious forms of ideological interpellation" Orientalism functioned as a "secular knowledge" (189), marking for a complexity that Said remains aloof from. Ahmad's point is further underscored by the fact that anti-Western misrepresentations are almost as common in the formerly colonized countries, even today, as Orientalist discourse was in the West. "Occidentalism" has been a persistent discourse in the postcolonial world, and defined as "the dehumanizing picture of the West painted by its enemies" (Buruma and Margalit 5).

I argue that a study of mutual representations between the West and the non-West has to focus more substantially on the imaginative aspect of Orientalism and Occidentalism, since works of fiction have an *indirect* relationship to the workings of (post)colonial power which deliberately "misrepresents" cultural others. In my thesis, I undertake such a study of the imaginative expressions of Orientalism in contemporary times, but problematize the relativistic assumptions associated with the term "postmodern" by examining texts by postmodernist authors who are culturally situated at various self-fashioned positions in between the East-West divide. These authors deploy Orientalist tropes neither to deliberately "misrepresent" the East nor to espouse a relativistic attitude towards its representation, but to politically mobilize these colonial tropes in new and culturally-specific contexts. Orientalism has been perceived as a question of representation by several scholars who have explored its dialogic nature. *Translating Orients: Between Ideology and Utopia* (2004), by Timothy Weiss, is particularly relevant to my arguments. Weiss sees the cultural exchanges between the West and its others as a complex series of translations, and approaches its politics through a hermeneutical understanding of representation. According to Weiss, "Said's approach maximizes – to the point of determinism – the reproductive capacity of the discourse

formation and the role that prejudgments and prejudices play in knowledge and power, while it minimizes or ignores the role of interpretation and innovation" (5).

The translational approach is necessary to go beyond this theoretical preclusion and make sense of certain post-Saidian developments in literary Orientalism. Weiss borrows from Wolfgang Iser's argument that "interpretation is a form of translation," and the four modes or procedures of translation discussed by Iser: "authority," the "hermeneutic circle," the "recursive loop," and the "travelling differential" (Weiss 9-10). Among these, the third and the fourth are of interest to my work in this dissertation. The recursive loop dominates when the subject matter to be translated remains open and mutable, and is marked by the accidental and unexpected (Weiss 10). The translational approach discounts any essentialistic understanding of the West or the East, emphasizing dynamic interdependence instead. The fourth translational mode identified by Iser, the "travelling differential," attempts to translate absolutes, such as the concept of God, "that no register of translation can encompass" (Weiss 11). It is referred to by Weiss in the context of Jorge Luis Borges's Oriental fiction, which will be instrumental in my work. The congruities between travelling differential and Said's idea of travelling theory opens up a new way of studying Orientalist tropes as being open-ended and communicable between cultures. In this case, the differential would be the perception of the Orient as an embodiment of mystery, whose function differs in colonial and postcolonial/postmodern times.

Borrowing the opposition between ideology and utopia from Paul Ricoeur's *Lectures on ideology and Utopia* (1986), Weiss inaugurates an important alternative way of reading the use of Orientalist tropes. He further indicates that literary Orients in the works of avant-guard writers can engage in a "revisioning of cultural imaginaries (e.g., the end of East/West?)" (17). The sociologist Karl Mannheim shares a similar view on "utopia as the force that shatters the power of 'ideology'" (Mohan 9), and Ernst Bloch elaborates on the

distinction between abstract and concrete utopias (Mohan 10). In this respect, literary Orients as spaces of radical alterity can be considered abstract utopias, or fictional heterotopias. In his 1967 lecture "Of Other Spaces," Foucault defines heterotopias as "something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" (20). The Oriental spaces found in the novels of Pamuk, Rushdie, Eco or Shafak are "effectively enacted" inasmuch as they are realizable within the fictional worlds of the novels. The unsettling impact of such spaces is comparable to Foucault's earlier description of heterotopias in *The Order of Things* (1966), based on the description of a Chinese encyclopaedia in a story by Jorge Luis Borges: "Heterotopias are disturbing, probably because they shatter or tangle common names, because they destroy 'syntax' in advance . . . heterotopias desiccate speech, stop words in their tracks, contest the very possibility of grammar at its source" (4). In the texts I examine, Oriental spaces imbued with the uncanny are often intended to produce this impact as a means of cultural critique. The distinction that Weiss makes –between Orients as ideology and as utopia – can also be understood as a distinction between "homotopia" (Mohan 8) and heterotopia. Coining the term as a counterpoint to heterotopia, Anupama Mohan defines homotopia as "those visions of unified collectivity where an aggressively homogenizing impulse operates" (8). The Saidian Orient conceived of as a colonialist ideological construction can be called a homotopia, whereas the alternate possibilities proposed by Weiss, Timothy Yu, Ian Almond etc form, I argue, a heterotopic vision of the Orient.

variegated and open-ended picture of the West's engagement with the Orient emerges in some pre-Saidian works on the subject, such as Raymond Schwab's magnum opus, *The Oriental Renaissance: Europe's Rediscovery of India and the East, 1680-1880* (1950). The Orient as an alter ego to the West has found expression in a much wider variety of

imaginative texts and narratives than a monological study of Orientalism can do justice to. A. R. Kidwai lists a number of early literary surveys, in his book *Literary Orientalism: A Companion* (2009): Marie de Meester's *Oriental Influences in the English Literature of the Nineteenth Century* (1914), Edna Osborne's *Oriental Diction and Theme in English Verse* (1916), and B.P. Smith's *Islam in English Literature*, which Kidwai calls "the first well-focussed study of Literary Orientalism" (xv). Martha P. Conant, in her *Oriental Tale in England in the Eighteenth Century* (1908), classified the tales she studied into four groups, which underline their functional roles: the imaginative, the moralistic and philosophic, and the satiric (qtd. in Kidwai xv). Thus, the history of using Oriental themes and settings for philosophical introspection is as long as literary Orientalism itself. My thesis attempts to take this philosophical-narratological understanding of literary Orientalism to postmodern texts, which deploy the same tropes with radically new implications.

The genealogy of literary Orientalism, and consequently that of the "Oriental Renaissance" (Schwab 11) in European literature, can be traced back to the West's encounter with the Islamic Orient. Among secular prose texts disseminated from the Islamic world, one particular group of ancient oral narratives found in the form of Arabic manuscripts – the *Alf layla wa layla*, known in the West as the *One Thousand and One Nights* (Makdisi and Nussbaum 1) – came to have an immense impact on the European literary landscape. I shall give a brief overview of the complex process of its acculturation and transculturation, particularly focusing on its influence on late twentieth-century novelistic forms.

III. *The One Thousand and One Nights* as a Reservoir of Tropes

The *One Thousand and One Nights* had a more determinant impact on Romanticism, in France, Germany, and England, than Sanskrit literature – a phenomenon Schwab describes as

"the *Thousand and One Nights* triumphing over the Vedas" (195). The dialogic nature of literary Orientalism can be inferred from the extent to which movements in modern European literature have been impelled by the incursion of Oriental texts. The translational history of the *One Thousand and One Nights* or *The Arabian Nights*, is one of prolonged intercultural exchanges – between India, the Middle-East, and the West. The "vertiginously unstable text" (Makdisi and Nussbaum 1), first found in the form of Arabic manuscripts in Iraq and Syria, is made up of narratives from medieval Arabic, Persian, Egyptian, Sanskrit, and Mesopotamian literatures. Many tales were originally oral narratives from the Abbasid and Mamluk eras, while others, especially the frame story of Shahriyar and Shahrazad, are probably drawn from the Pahlavi Persian work *Hezār Afsān* (*A Thousand Tales*), which in turn were influenced by Indian folk tales ("*Alf layla*" 361). Jean Antoine Galland translated the tales into French from a Syrian manuscript, and his work was, in turn, soon translated into several European languages and achieved wide popularity. It is an established fact that "the *Nights* is a product of the West's interaction with the Orient" (Yamanaka and Nishio xvi) – not only the regions entailed by the term, but with the very *idea* of the Orient. But the West can also be said to be a product of the *Nights*, since, according to Ulrich Marzolph, "[n]o other single work of Oriental literature (besides the Bible) has had such a long-lasting and deep impact on world culture" (3).

The predominant currency of this cross-cultural exchange has been "motifs," i.e., recurrent narrative themes. Christina A. Tuczay notes "parallel motifs in *The Arabian Nights* and in ancient and medieval popular and learned literature about exotic lands of the East" (272), indicating that the *Nights* had a role in the development of proto-Orientalist stereotypes during the Middle Ages, which shaped later versions of Orientalism (Sardar 17). Translations of the *Nights* inaugurated contact-zones of hybrid, Europeanized Orients, serving as a fictional medium that popularized the gloss of Arab culture by eminent Orientalists who

translated the tales. Thus, the *Nights* became a route-map, as it were, for the armchair (European) traveller into the myriad lands of "the East" and served as more than a mere illustration of cultural otherness.

Laura Doyle suggests that "the organization of *1001 Nights* around [an] inter-imperial political economy" justifies its appeal to postcolonial writers who adopt/adapt it for political critique, since "these writers' engagement with a literary tradition dating to Persian and Islamic empires both supplements and complicates their critiques of Anglo-European empires and gives their texts a deeper potency" (34). In the late twentieth century, there has been an abundance of postcolonial literature which explicitly refers to the *One Thousand and One Nights* – as the basis of plots, and/or as a reservoir of tropes to be redefined in new political contexts. Richard van Leeuwen, in *The Thousand and One Nights and Twentieth-Century Fiction*: *Intertextual Readings* (2018), establishes the point that the *Nights* remained "vibrantly alive in non-western cultures, in new guises and forms, often conveyed through European literary influence" (1). Exploring literary works across the East-West divide, van Leeuwen demonstrates that "over the course of time the influence of the Nights was not limited to exoticism, but rather *penetrated the level of narrative strategies and procedures*" (14, my emphasis). As Borges writes in his essay "The Translators of The Thousand and One Nights" (1936), "the translator being translated" (qtd. in Doniger, para. 5) and interpolated by later writers is the norm in the transcultural history of the *Nights.* In light of Weiss's *Translating Orients*, it can be said that the *Nights* is amenable to being used as an intertext for utopian rather than ideological representations of the Orient.

IV. Borges as the Pioneer of Post-Orientalist Literature

If there is one common influence on the metafictional poetics of all the major novelists I examine, it is the literary corpus of Jorge Luis Borges. The versatile Argentinian

author's stories set in or premised on the East contain a unique, encyclopaedic vision of reality which shaped the metafictional *world-making* of many postmodernist writers. His ideas have also influenced postmodern theorists, as is evident from Foucault's reference to him in his formulation of the concept of heterotopia. The Orient is an almost inexhaustible storehouse of tropes for Borges. He remodels stereotypical Orientalist tropes to give them new philosophical valences, creating precedents for all of the post-Orientalist tropes I identify in individual authors in my thesis: the Oriental city, the museum, the library, the labyrinth, the mirror, the garden, and more. All of these are transformed into fictional heterotopic spaces by Borges's encyclopaedic approach. The Borgesian, *textualist* approach to Orientalism has been called the "bibliophilic Orient" (Weiss 19), and the influence of the *One Thousand and One Nights* on postmodern literary inventions in the West has mostly taken this form. Borges describes the *Nights* as a book that shapes the modern West's idea of the East, even though the East is not a definable geographical entity but an imaginary construct, going so far as to say that "[t]he connotations of that word ["East"] we owe to The Thousand and One Nights" ("The Thousand and One Nights" 568). He identifies several tropes in that cycle of tales – such as the mirroring effect of imbricated stories (573), and the motif of magic (570) – which have deeply influenced Western fiction and also recur in contemporary magical realist (meta)fiction.

Weiss associates the Borgesian search for "impossible possibilities" in the Orient with an "utopian vision" (19), and states that "Borges is perhaps the first (modern) Western writer to treat the Orient as neither subject nor object, but as emergent reality" (20). He characterizes this Borgesian concept as "the bibliophilic Orient" (Weiss 19), which differs from the Orients of most writers and scholars that came before: "For Borges, the Oriental derives from texts and books; it constitutes an imaginative space, a feeling, a collection of philosophical ideas" (Weiss 20). The intertextual, "bibliophilic" approach distinguishes post-Orientalism from

earlier Orientalisms as much as it distinguishes Borges from earlier Western writers who wrote from, or referred to, some lived experience in Oriental countries. For Borges, the vague geographical sense of the East-West binary pales before the evocative power of the East, and in his lecture "The Thousand and One Nights," he speaks of the connotative meanings of the Orient that belong to a certain "poetics of space" (Weiss 21). Borges draws the tropological scaffolding of his stories from the fantastical world of the *One Thousand and One Nights,* but presents them in the annotated and referential form of Orientalist scholarship. Moreover, he infuses the fantastical images and tropes with proto-postmodern philosophical ideas. This leads me to argue that post-Orientalism is characterized by esoteric and/or philosophical ideas being densely superimposed on Oriental imagery. Post-Orientalism, therefore, does not necessarily put an end to the Orientalist misrepresentation of non-Western cultures, but reorients the politics of it towards self-critique.

V. Post-Orientalism across Literary Genres

Throughout the 1990s, the phrase "post-Orientalism" had been used primarily as a chronological signifier, referring to various postcolonial conditions in which the effect of Orientalism is wearing off for political reasons, and a new critical approach, informed by Said's arguments, is taking shape. As for the qualitative implications the term later assumed, they can be divided into two categories, based on its use in two distinct fields of inquiry: literary and geopolitical. While these are not mutually exclusive, and intersect at critical discursive junctures, my project adopts the term "post-Orientalism" predominantly in relation to the literary aspects of its complicated genealogy. Ian Almond's use of the word "post-Orientalist" is particularly significant for my project, since he applies it to Borges, whose works have influenced all three major postmodern authors that I examine in my first three chapters: Salman Rushdie, Orhan Pamuk, and Umberto Eco. for the purposes of my argument, I define post-Orientalism as: the practice of deploying Orientalist tropes and

images to portray an imaginary space that alienates the ideological opposition between the East and the West, and subverts the hierarchical relationship between them by portraying Oriental spaces as neither objects nor subjects, but *emergent fictionalities*. I refer to Weiss's idea of Orient as "emergent reality" (17) in coining the term. The emergent fictionality of post-Orientalist spaces inheres in an acute awareness of, and insistence on, the fictionality of the imagined spaces.

Although the defining traits of the tropology are set in place by the form it takes in metafiction, what I attempt to identify as post-Orientalist tropes occur in a much wider range of literature, including travel writing, popular (non-)fiction, and popular history. In my fourth chapter, I gauge the influence that *non*-metafictional texts have in determining the way post-Orientalism affects culture. I read the works of two historians whose travel writings often exhibit significant similarities with fiction: William Dalrymple and Amitav Ghosh. I also examine fictional texts by two non-European female authors as a counterpoint to the canonical male metafictional authors that I have focused on so far. Various revisions to the idea of the Orient are devised by non-white female authors, effecting radical shifts in the discourse which reimagine and re-situate those gendered spaces. Gender provides a perspective on the East-West binary which gives new directions to the construction of Orientalized spaces in contemporary non-European fiction. The authors I choose, Elif Shafak and Hanan Al-Shaykh, are primarily known for their social realist and historical novels – very different from the metafictional texts I have focused on in chapters 1–3.

VI. Conclusion

The travel of the *One Thousand and One Nights* into the Western popular imagination is itself a phenomenon that undercuts the Saidian Orientalist hierarchy. The representational categories of the West and the East are destabilized by the ambivalent cultural politics of

such an exchange, and the metafictional turn given to it by Borges mobilized the underlying disruptive potential of the *Nights* as a travelling cultural artefact. Such travelling is instantiated in all the works that I examine in the form of travelling tropes, whose dynamic reinterpretations themselves spawn new lives and new meanings in new cultural and temporal contexts. The dome, the museum, the library, the labyrinth, and the medieval map are some such travelling tropes that define the individual post-Orientalist poetics of the authors discussed in my project. I attempt to make a case for post-Orientalism as a causative agent responsible for the polemical force of postmodern fiction, while also accounting for its prevalence in contemporary literature in various other forms. Postmodern literature is often perceived as a threat by oppressive regimes, just as modernist and avant-garde literature were earlier. My contention in this thesis has been that literary postmodernism, especially works that explicitly reference Orientalist images and refine/revise them, is trenchantly political, controversial, and often perilous – for their authors as well as for their readers in communities where they provoke reactionary responses.

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